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ABSTRACT

This paper presents three aspects of children's reaction to divorce: a brief theory as to why parents become separated and/or divorced; factual research summaries on the influence of divorce on children; and some proposed remedies. Research is cited that shows the effects of divorce on children's sex role development, self concept, emotional development and school achievement. Legal problems engendered and the problems faced by the one-parent family are also discussed. Suggested remedies include: better public education concerning the single-parent family, therapy, crisis intervention, putting the needs of the child first, formal court agreements on parent responsibilities, development of a family counseling model and constructive family courts. (MS)

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Children's Reactions To Separation and Divorce

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Considering all the problems related to separation and divorce--and the problems are legion--problems relating to the reactions and welfare of children have been the least studied, the least understood, and the least prepared for by the courts and by society. Since adults initiate separation and divorce proceedings--children don't--the children are the unwelcome victims of whatever good or evil may take place; unfortunately there seems to be more of the latter--evil.

This paper will concern just three aspects of children's reactions to separation and divorce: first, a brief theory as to why parents become separated and/or divorced; second, some factual research summaries on the influence on children; and third, on some proposed remedies. First, a theory of separation and divorce.

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People get separated or divorced when their expectations of the other partner are not fulfilled, or capable of being fulfilled, as judged by the separating one (or possibly mutually, by both parties.) Mostly these psychological changes are related to the lives of each participant (husband/wife, mother/father), to the social/cultural conditions under which they live, to economic factors, to belief systems, and to their capacities to absorb and deal with stress. These factors differ with age, education, cultural background, occupation, and so forth. Separation and divorce rates differ as a function of these social and individual

parameters. In order to influence separation and divorce statistics, society would have to change in some of its major characteristics, for the trend now is toward a greater tendency toward separation and/or divorce as the threshhold for taking such actions, owing to social parameters, is being lowered progressively (Carter and Glick, 1970). Therefore, if this trend continues, we may have more one-parent families than we have two-parent families, and the problem associated with one-parent families will likely multiply, at least in some respects. Since society still does not fully accept one-parent families, the social pressures, criticisms, and so on, directed to these smaller units will make the lives of the member more difficult than they need to be.

The differing expectations of parents toward one another are increasingly disparate owing, in part, to increased expectations on the parts of individuals for self-development and self-assertiveness. It is as if we could not have at the same time individual fulfillment and social/family/parenting fulfillment in the same unit, serving the same ends. Since these matters of fulfillment appear to be more individual than social at our present time, children in already constituted families are bound to be the victims of the changes wrought, right or wrong, for better or for worse. Thereby hangs our story of the effects of separation and divorce on children.

I wish to summarize a series of studies on the reactions of children, or the effects on children, of separation and divorce. As already indicated, these influences and effects are not generally wholesome, however much the parents (adults) concerned may feel liberated or whatnot. The child comes into the separation and

divorce picture from a vastly different vantage point than the adults, has different interests, needs, capabilities at stake, and has a different future from what he/she had before. Moreover, the social structure that deals with separation and divorce, viz., the courts, are geared to the interests of the adults--courts are mostly social instruments and institutions for dealing with contention and adversary relations and not with mental health issues, ameliorative goals or long-range social planning, all of which are required for the child's welfare. In fact, one might almost make the extravagent statement that, insofar as children are concerned, the courts could be left out of the picture--the parents upon separation and/or divorce could take care of the children perhaps better than with court intervention, and at the same time not engage in the long fights and post-divorce contentions over visitations, etc. that now ensue. However, no radical change is likely to come about in the lifetimes of those of us present here today, so we need to get on with simpler issues. We need to better understand children's reaction so reform can be suitably and realistically planned.

Studies show the following effects on children from separation and divorce:

1. Society's prejudices against the single-parent family may prejudice sex role development in children and make long-range adjustment more difficult for children. This is the aftermath of divorce (Burgess, 1973). I know of a case where a father was living with his two young adolescent sons after the wife left the scene: They were known in the neighborhood as "...those three bachelors living over there..." by some neighbors, and little or no attempt was exerted to include the sons in neighborhood social activities, carpooling, etc.

2. Father absence from the family adversely affected the self-image concepts among white boys and among black girls (a sex/race differentiation here), moreso than among the opposite sex/race categories (Hunt, 1972). Social class, race, sex differences pop up differently in different studies; no transcendent or permanent type reaction to father absence seems to emerge, but usually some adverse reactions are noted.

3. Studying psychiatric/psychological problems among urban children, one study (Langner, 1969) showed that children without fathers were worse off in terms of psychological impairment or deficits than were children who had fathers in the home. One lad I know who was a member of a mother-run single parent family, was told by an intact family neighbor to "...go get your own father to take you to the show—you have a father too; just because he doesn't live with you doesn't cut any ice...don't depend upon us all the time." The boy in question was startled and hurt to learn that he was regarded by his otherwise seemingly friendly neighbors as being so different- yes, he <u>did</u> have a father, but yet there was something very different in his neighborhood status.

4. In the case of adolescent girls from father-absent homes (either out of prolonged separation and/or divorce), the girls tended to seek proximity and attention from males and tended to get into earlier hetersexual behavior (Hetherington, 1972). Several adolescent (college age) female patients from divorced parents of several

years standing I have recently seen, tended to be inordinately interested in "having" a boy friend, to be sexually flirtatious upon slightest interest shown by the males, and to care little about female-peer relationships. The latter were always "second best" to even the slightest relationships with males.

5. In another study along the same lines by the same author (Hetherington, 1973), father-absent effects showed up more noticably among adolescent girls; and the girls were noted to be clumsily erotic with men. The "clumsy" part, among the patients I have seen, meant that the young women were overly aggressive, impatient for sexual advances and were sometimes verbally provocative as well, often with strangers or with men only slightly known to them.

6. As mentioned earlier, the single-parent family unit comes in for a large share of problems. Some questions are those related to remarriage of both parents and strong feelings about "new mothers" or "new fathers;" about visitation privileges and times and places with the estranged parent; and how these issues influenced the integrity of the single-parent family. Anger, hostility and grief over the lost parent was evident (Krell, 1972). Some single-parent individuals I work with try to invoke the authority of the absent parent (especially if it is the father), to try to establish and preserve the integrity and discipline of the single-parent family. "If your father were here, he would not let you do that..." the mother might say, in order to control the

behavior of adolescents in the home. Or, if the mother in the single-parent family wanted to heap some abuse on the absent father, she might say, as one did to her daughter, "Go ask your father what you should do--you won't listen to me anyhow--and let him be responsible for the risks you're taking."

7. As stated in my introductory and sketchy theory about separation and divorce, courts tend often to worsen family problems, not lessen them. In matters pertaining to custody, decisions tend to be made on legal grounds rather than on ground related to the child's emotional condition and needs; the child's needs tend to get lost or distorted in the battles between the parents (Rogers, 1972). I know of an instance where a mother of three young children, in concert with her lawyer-lover-suitor, dragged the estranged father into court at every possible opportunity over the slightest issue: if the father kept the children an hour or ~~two~~ 20 too long on a visitation, if the father took home to fix toys of the children, or if the father "transgressed" into the domain of the house when picking up or returning the children, or when the father took away the lawnmower momentarily to fix it so the 12 year old son could mow the lawn! The court addressed these issues as if they were legally viable. The court did not see these issues in terms of their contention and/or the influence they had on the children, as the children learned that any visitation could be whipped into a court appearance. Even neighbor children, as observers/onlookers, were dragged into court to testify on one such occasion!

8. Added to these legal issues are issues related to differences in religion among the separted/divorced parents and the fights over loyalties to beliefs among the children. While people have rights to their religious beliefs, it is often a very small step to make the beliefs themselves take on legal ramifications and serves as bases for contention (Stuart and Abt, 1972). One father, retaining custody of an early adolescent son, refused to let his estranged wife have the lad on Sunday morning, in order to prevent her taking him to "her church" before the father could get the son to "his church".

9. The single parent family, as previously noted, remains vulnerable in the eyes of society as an integral family unit. (Klingenmaier 1972). Some single-parent family units I know of, in a presumed liberal suburban area near Washington, D.C., were frequently ostracized by intact family units when neighborhood picnics and the like were planned. These instances then cause the children of divorced parents to blame the parents and to harbour resentments against the parents over the years.

10. Post-divorce litigation over children continues owing to inconsistencies in the law re: divorce matters; the children get buffeted about in the conflicting situations brought on by the warring parents (Robbins, 1974). One adolescent I had in psychotherapy was drawn into legal battles by his divorced parents on the average of every 8-10 weeks, for over a year's time, in regard to issues about schooling, medical costs (whether legitimate or not)

travel, and almost any other matter either parent could use to fight the other. No one seemed to care how the lad was affected!

11. Some evidence exists that young school age children (ages 6 to 9) are more profoundly affected by separation and divorce; one study (Kelley and Wallerstein 1975) showed sadness and longing for the absent father, with anger (and blame) toward the mother expressed, especially by the girls. The original reaction to the separation was panic, followed quickly by anger and resentment. The child's world is quickly shattered by separation and divorce; the under-school-age child does not register the impact as much; the older child may have more peer, social and school resources to buffet the shock; the younger school age child (age 6 to 9) may be the most vulnerable, may have the greatest need for therapy and for compassion by the courts and by others.

12. Some evidence exists that no-fault divorce laws make matters easier on children; sex discrimination between parents may be reduced or eliminated; and children's interests are being upgraded. This is related to what is called, in some states, The Uniform Marriage and Divorce Act (Freed and Foster, 1974).

13. Not only are emotional problems evident as has been illustrated here, but school achievement problems may be present among father absent homes. Reading and arithmetic suffered especially among school age children with I.Q. ratings over 100. It is as if the more that might be expected of the child on the basis of ability,

the more the achievement-ability gap occurs (Sciara, 1975).

14. The single-parent, mother-run family unit comes in for some special problems, as shown by the mother and by the children. Four areas of concern common to both were: school, church and community, peers, and self. Children-only concerns were about their fathers and mothers; younger children, ages 6 to 9, were seemingly more affected in the sense of feeling a loss of father from the home (Prewitt, 1975).

15. In studying the mourning reactions of children to separation and divorce, it was noted that children do experience an object loss (the father) which precipitates a mourning reaction; later adjustment depends upon how well this adjustment is handled (Buckley, 1974). Recently I saw a 19 year old college male whose parents separated and divorced when he was 15, and he was still angry and morbid toward both parents for the divorce, for their fighting, for the parents shifting their responsibilities toward him on to each other, and for lack of emotional support as parents.

What To Do To Remedy The Problems

Of course, no overall remedies are possible. One could start earlier in life and try to educate and prepare people more adequately for marriage; or one could

set up more stringent divorce requirement requiring consultation that explicitely included and planned for the children. But once separation and divorce have occurred, the problems loom somewhat larger and suggest the need for a greater variety of approaches. Some of these might include the following:

a) Better public education re: the single parent family.

b) Get the remaining intact family into therapy, if possible.

c) Develop crisis intervention techniques for all age groups, expecially applicable at the time of actual separation.

d) Delineate areas of agreement between parents re: the child so that matters pertaining to health, education,etc. are specifically attended to, and minor issues are not allowed to be used as "whipping posts" to obfuscate and/or avoid basic child care issues.

e) Always put the needs of the child first--preferably in writing--before the warring parents can wreck havoc. This the court should do without delay.

f) Try to recognize more clearly different needs of different age and sex groups of children.

g) Establish through formal (court) agreement each parent's responsibilities vis a vis the child(ren) and make this known to the child at the outset. The child does not need to be concerned with the details of parental differences involved in separation and divorce; but the child does need to be involved in the healing, remedial and social responsibility aspects of handling separation and divorce, once they have occurred.

h) Possibly through the medium of the court, establish a "family counseling model" for use with children (this could also include group counseling for various age groups from different families). While the court cannot force therapy on anyone, the court's role in setting the conditions of separation and divorce can and should involve some reference to "family counseling". The court is also involved at a time when these counseling requirements are most propitious.

i) Perhaps attempt to establish "family courts" that would get away from contention and adversary positions and view the family as a unit to be dealt with rather than simply coping legally with two warring adults.

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